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# Problem solved? Absurdist humour and incongruity-resolution

<https://doi.org/10.1515/jls-2019-2005>

**Abstract:** This article explores the role absurdist humour fulfils in the narrative structure of novels as well as its impact on the process of literary interpretation. Tracing the historical and philosophical roots of absurdist humour, the article emphasises the importance of the concept of incongruity. It then critically evaluates current and influential cognitive and linguistic theories of humour, specifically incongruity-resolution theories and their purported suitability for literary analysis. Drawing on schema-theory, the article examines a passage from Douglas Adams's *The Restaurant at the End of the Universe* (1980; henceforth *The Restaurant*) and illustrates why literary humour cannot be analysed in the same manner as short, often specifically designed, joke texts as is common practice in most humour research. Subsequently, the traditional classification of absurdist humour as a type of humour where resolution cannot be achieved is also challenged as the analysis reveals how absurdist humour is part and parcel of the narrative structure of *The Restaurant* and how the incongruity is resolved at the moment of literary interpretation.

**Keywords:** absurdist humour, incongruity, schemata, joke texts

## 1 Introduction

In Douglas Adams's 1979 novel *The Hitch Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, Agrajag is a hapless creature whose many reincarnations continually end up being killed, most of the time unintentionally, by the main protagonist of the story, Arthur Dent. The first time Agrajag is introduced to the reader, it has taken on the form of a bowl of petunias<sup>1</sup>:

Curiously enough, the only thing that went through the mind of the bowl of petunias as it fell was Oh no, not again. Many people have speculated that if we knew exactly why the

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<sup>1</sup> This connection between Agrajag, the bowl of petunias, and Arthur Dent is only revealed in the sequel (Adams 1995a).

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bowl of petunias had thought that we would know a lot more about the nature of the Universe than we do now. (Adams 1995b: 100)

The odd twists in this quotation are indicative of a specific type of humour permeating the novel, which I call absurdist humour. Humour and the absurd share a close connection as both are generally defined in terms of incongruity which implicates a cognitive response. Dominant in cognitive approaches to humour is the incongruity-resolution theory which states that “a joke text (T) is funny if T contains one or more incongruous elements any of which may or may not be fully or in part (playfully or not) resolved by the occurrence of the punch line, which may or may not introduce new incongruities” (Attardo et al. 2002: 27).<sup>2</sup> As an example of instances of humour where resolution is only partially realised or entirely absent, Attardo points to absurdist humour which “lacks resolution” (Attardo et al. 2002: 25).<sup>3</sup> Oring, however, doubts that such a distinction “can be maintained” as all types of jokes are to some degree absurd and therefore no joke is ever truly resolved (Oring 2003: 14). What differentiates absurdist humour from other forms, says Oring, is the disparity between “the joke world” and “the world as we know it” which cannot be resolved (Oring 2003: 25).<sup>4</sup> Oring correctly identifies the discrepancy between “joke” world and real world as a distinguishing feature of the absurd. I believe, however, that this incongruity is in fact resolved at the moment of (literary) interpretation as absurdist humour can only be understood in the context of the entire text, yet at the same time, absurdist humour is also instrumental in defining that context, something which I will return to later in the article.

Humour theorists like Attardo are predominantly interested in what makes humorous discourse stand out from “serious discourse”. They are not so much interested in the *interpretation* of humour as in the *description* of humorous “mechanisms that exist prior to any text and that make the interpretation of a text possible” (Attardo 2006: 351). Consequently, traditional (linguistically oriented) humour research has the tendency to focus on short jokes rather

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<sup>2</sup> Theories of humour generally fall into three categories. Next to cognitive theories of humour, there are psychoanalytical theories of humour, such as release/relief theory, which holds that “laughter provides relief to various tensions and allows repressed desires to be satisfied” (Ermida 2008: 22); and sociological theories of humour, particularly superiority theory, which situates the “roots of laughter in triumph over other people (or circumstances) [...] Elation is engendered when we compare ourselves favorably to others as being less stupid, less ugly, less unfortunate, or less weak” (Keith-Spiegel 1972: 6). For a more detailed survey see Martin (2007).  
<sup>3</sup> A view shared by, for instance, Gavins (2013: 50), Ermida (2008: 74) and Hamilton (2013: 26).  
<sup>4</sup> Attardo, later, seems to come round to Oring’s point of view stating that nonsensical jokes are only partially resolved but that “truly nonsensical jokes” contain “an element of incongruity that isn’t even addressed” (Hempelmann and Attardo 2011: 143).

than on longer and more complex narrative texts. But when reading a novel like Adams's Sci-Fi classic, humorous passages as the one cited above are never read nor understood in isolation. They are firmly embedded in the narrative context and all that this entails, and thus have significant bearing on both the reading process and the interpretative process. Yet this is something that is all too often glossed over in the field of humour studies.

This article intends to address this oversight and explores how absurdist humour impacts (literary) interpretation, challenging the generally espoused belief that absurdist humour's incongruity remains unresolved. Following a synthesis of influential and contemporary cognitive theories of humour dealing with incongruity and its resolution, the article posits that resolution is in fact achieved, not at the linguistic level of the humorous utterance but at the level of a reader's interpretation. To this end, the article combines insights from incongruity-resolution theories with those drawn from schema theory. Schema theory has successfully been used in literary studies to describe how readers process and understand narrative text. It can also be used to describe how readers reconcile the disparity between the storyworld (in lieu of Oring's "joke world") and the "real world". Additionally, schema theory proves fruitful for the study of humour, particularly absurdist humour, because, as Norrick says, "schema conflicts on a single level suggests (the possibility of) conflict resolution on some other level" which in turn generates humour (Norrick 1986: 230). Integrating incongruity-resolution theory and schema theory enhances our understanding of absurdist humour in literature, elucidates how it can generate meaning, and thus expands on the role it plays in the interpretative process. The study of literary humour necessitates such an integrated approach as humour constitutes an inextricable part of the narrative structure. Humour, for instance, impacts characterization, influences plot development, interacts with the narrative setting, and thus significantly affects how we interpret a literary text.

## 2 Incongruity and absurdist humour

If there is one thing cognitive humour theorists (generally) agree on, it is the belief that humour is caused by incongruity, even if they do not necessarily agree as to what incongruity means exactly (Ritchie 2009: 313–314). McGhee indicates that "[the terms] congruity and incongruity refer to the relationship between components of an object, event, idea, social expectation, and so forth" (1979: 6), going on to specify that when "the arrangement of the constituent elements of an event is incompatible with the normal or expected pattern, the

event is perceived as incongruous” (1979: 6–7). Simply put, incongruity describes an experience where certain objects, events, or actions do not conform to our expectations of them. McGhee considers incongruity a vital and “necessary condition for humour, but not a sufficient one” (1979: 10).<sup>5</sup>

The relationship between incongruity and humour has been widely explored in philosophy as well. And while each philosopher broaches the topic in the context of their specific philosophical project many share the belief that incongruity is of pivotal importance to the humorous experience. And to this day some of these ideas still resonate with contemporary humour theories and have a bearing on the conceptualisation of absurdist humour specifically.

One of the earliest thinkers to have addressed humour and its causes was Aristotle who believed that one way to get an audience to laugh was to engender a certain set of expectations only to subsequently “violate” them (Morreall 2013: 4).<sup>6</sup> The idea that jokes or humorous experiences first create certain expectations which are then not realised is also expressed by Kant in a passage where he, interestingly, also links laughter and the absurd: “Whatever is to arouse lively, convulsive laughter must contain something absurd (hence something that the understanding cannot like for its own sake)” (Kant et al. 1987: 203). A joke, then, according to Kant provides a kind of mental exercise, which may not lead to tangible results, but nevertheless has a pleasurable effect on the human body (Kant et al. 1987: 203–205).

To Schopenhauer, humour and laughter arise “from nothing but the suddenly perceived incongruity between a concept and the real objects that had been thought through it in some relation” (1966: 59).<sup>7</sup> When abstract conception does not match concrete perception, humour ensues, says Schopenhauer. Defining humour in those terms, again, hints at a relationship between humour and the absurd, especially when considering that the latter expresses “a relationship of nonconformity between the individual and the world” (Cruikshank 1970: 51). Whereas Schopenhauer situates the incongruity that

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<sup>5</sup> This belief is shared by many humour theorists, like Morreall (2009: 13) but is certainly not uncontested. See, among others, Gruner 2000 and Latta 1999.

<sup>6</sup> Aristotle’s views on humour and wit are also frequently considered to be a “precursor” of sorts of superiority theory, just as they are of incongruity theory. This already points to the often arbitrary nature of these specific labels (Keith-Spiegel 1972: 4).

<sup>7</sup> Schopenhauer combines later elements from incongruity and superiority theory. Mockery hurts, he says, because it highlights the discrepancy between our own conception and perception of reality and that of others, revealing what we believed to be true to be false or inaccurate. We find humour enjoyable because it is testament to the triumph of our powers of perception over conscious thought (Morreall 2013: 4).

causes laughter between “our sense perceptions of things and our abstract rational knowledge of those same things” (Morreall 2013: 4), Kierkegaard, like Kant before him, feels humour, or the “comical” to be exact, is caused by a contradiction between expectation and experience (Kierkegaard and Hannay 2009: 49).<sup>8</sup> And our awareness of the comic is particularly informed by “incongruity, especially when the incongruity is unexpected or accidental” (Oden 2004: 10).

Such a brief account of how philosophy entwines incongruity and humour does not do justice to the complexity and richness of the philosophers discussed above, but it does bring to the fore certain recurring ideas that have significant bearing both on the study of humour in general and on the study of humour in literature specifically. A first idea is that there seems to exist some innate relationship between the concept of humour and the absurd. The exact nature of that relationship, however, is less clear. Evidently, not all jokes are absurd and not all absurd situations or events are humorous. That many seemingly intuitively pick up on a connection between these two concepts owes to the notion of incongruity as a defining feature. If and how that incongruity is ultimately resolved will be explored in greater detail in the following section of the article.

A second idea that emerges from this brief overview is the idea that incongruity is presented as indispensable to the humorous experience which follows from the interplay between expectation and experience. And while it is certainly hard to deny that the conflict between expectation and experience can indeed generate humour, it is also true that there exist other cognitive responses that are characterised by such a conflict, such as horror, or surprise which can but need not elicit humour. In the context of literature, specifically, incongruity is often caused by a comparison of textual information with a reader’s schemata, which essentially amount to structured representations of events, objects or actions gained through (personal) experience (Emmott and Alexander 2011: 2).

Take for instance the following passage from Adams’s *The Restaurant* (1980), when Arthur and Ford Prefect meet with a group of Golgafrinchans to discuss “fiscal policy”. The lazy Golgafrinchans have decided to “adopt the leaf as legal tender” in order to increase their wealth (Adams 1995b: 298). This brilliant plan, however, does not entirely work out as intended, but they soon arrive at a solution:

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<sup>8</sup> Kierkegaard’s treatment of humour is firmly rooted in his discussion of religion (Christianity), and consequently also the absurd, situated as humour is at the “*confinium* between the ethical and the religious” (Kierkegaard, qtd. in Oden 2004: 23).

‘But we have also,’ continued the management consultant, ‘run into a small inflation problem on account of the high level of leaf availability, which means that, I gather, the current going rate has something like three deciduous forests buying one ship’s peanut.’ Murmurs of alarm came from the crowd. The management consultant waved them down. ‘So in order to obviate this problem,’ he continued, ‘and effectively revalue the leaf, we are about to embark on a massive defoliation campaign, and ...er, burn down all the forests. I think you’ll all agree that’s a sensible move under the circumstances.’ The crowd seemed a little uncertain about this for a second or two until someone pointed out how much this would increase the value of the leaves in their pockets whereupon they let out whoops of delight and gave the management consultant a standing ovation. The accountants among them looked forward to a profitable autumn. (Adams 1995b: 298–299)

This passage is interesting for multiple reasons. It engenders expectations in its readers, only to subsequently frustrate them. These expectations are prompted by the initial similarity between fictional world and real world. Although this passage takes place approximately two million years ago, it is set on Earth, features physically recognizable characters (humanity’s supposed ancestors) and uses concepts familiar to modern readers, such as the economic system. Choosing leaves as legal tender, however, does not conform to our schematic expectations and rather strikes us as absurd. So too does the manner in which the Golgafrinchans intend to deal with the problem of inflation, without considering the possible consequences of their actions. The incongruity of the joke, then, is mirrored in the incongruity between storyworld and the world as we know it, to use Oring’s words. And it is exactly readers’ inability to resolve that incongruity, according to Oring, that makes this excerpt an example of absurdist humour.

A case can be made then that absurdist humour, certainly in literary texts, can exacerbate the incongruity between abstract concepts and the actual perception of these concepts, as posited by Schopenhauer. Interestingly, though, it can do this by emphasising the gap between fictional world and real world, but also by illustrating that the reality of the storyworld is not always as far removed from our own, no matter how absurd it may seem. Both strategies are often used concurrently. In the example above, a great many similarities are established between fictional world and readers’ experiential world. Yet, changing one vital parameter of the schema “economic system” sets in motion a series of events which all serve to highlight the incongruity between fictional world and reality. This dual aspect of similarity and difference means that absurdist humour is ideally suited to help us better understand the relationship between incongruity and its resolution, since absurdist humour operates in much the same way. Yet at the same time, the example above also makes clear that there is more to absurdist humour than just incongruity (leaves vs. money). There are a host of other contextual parameters at play that determine our humorous response

(such as the characteristics of the Golgafrinchans as a race, Arthur and Ford Prefect's response, the parodic style, etc.), which I will return to after first exploring the interplay between incongruity and its resolution.

### 3 Incongruity and resolution

Suls explains humour appreciation as a two-stage process: in a first stage a listener/reader's expectations are shown to be inaccurate. In a second stage the reader must try to resolve this issue and reconcile the incongruity by aligning set-up and punch line (Suls 1972: 82). He also emphasises that the incongruity must be sudden and surprising, necessary features which distinguish jokes from riddles, for instance. Riddles can also be surprising but they are not incongruous as the resolution follows logically and coherently from its original premise, something which is lacking in jokes (Suls 1972: 84).

Suls's insistence on the surprising nature of incongruity echoes, among others, Kierkegaard. It might also explain why many humour theorists remark on the (close) relationship between humour and the absurd. Something which is considered as absurd is generally something which is far removed from our everyday experiences, often surprising us. Such an explanation, however, fails to account for the fact that repetition can still elicit humorous responses. This is especially true for literary humour where a recurring type of humour or joke can engender "text-specific" schemata that mitigate surprise yet still generate humour. Suls's distinction between riddle and joke also proves somewhat unconvincing as people can sometimes perfectly predict the punchline of a joke and still be amused, suggesting that there exists at least some form of logical continuity between set-up and pay-off. One of the problems with much of the research on incongruity is that the concepts of incongruity and resolution are rarely "clearly defined" and the terms can mean different things to different authors (Ritchie 1999: 78). This lack of operational efficiency is something that linguistic scholars explicitly wish to address by developing more formal theories of humour.

Much of the groundwork for contemporary linguistic theories of humour was laid by Raskin's (1985) Semantic Script Theory of Humour (SSTH). The SSTH is strictly geared toward the analysis of "verbal humor", to "joke carrying text[s]" (Raskin 1985: 44). It postulates that a text is humorous if:

- (i) The text is compatible, fully or in part, with two different scripts.
- (ii) The two scripts with which the text is compatible are opposite [...]. The two scripts with which some text is compatible are said to overlap fully or in part on this text (Raskin 1985: 99 his emphasis).

Raskin illustrates his theory with the following joke:

‘Is the doctor at home?’ the patient asked in his bronchial whisper. ‘No,’ the doctor’s young and pretty wife whispered in reply. ‘Come right in’. (Raskin 1985: 100)

This joke text reveals an incongruity between the patient’s question and the doctor’s wife’s answer. A patient visiting a doctor activates a specific script (which Raskin terms “DOCTOR”), which initially is reinforced by the patient’s “bronchial whisper” intimating illness. But the doctor’s wife’s behaviour is incongruent with the world information attached to this script. She might invite the patient in, but he would not be able to achieve his presumed goal of receiving treatment. The combinatorial rules no longer make sense, says Raskin, and we start looking for a new script to interpret the interaction between the doctor’s wife and the patient. A second script (“LOVER”) is activated and we infer that the pair are engaged in an illicit affair.<sup>9</sup>

Raskin’s insistence on the two scripts overlapping constitutes a marked difference between the SSTH and Suls’s two-stage incongruity-resolution model. The former posits that humour is derived from the simultaneous activation of opposite scripts whereas the latter states that humour is only realised when the incongruity has been removed (resolved) and consequently one script has been replaced by another. The SSTH’s suitability for the analysis of humour is limited to very basic jokes that centre on the incongruity created by only two overlapping and opposed scripts (Raskin 1985: 46).<sup>10</sup> Raskin does, however, indicate that the SSTH should also be equipped to handle more complex and longer joke texts, while at the same time allowing for the possibility that his theory might have to be amended to better deal with more complex forms of humour (Raskin 1985: 46).

Attardo (1994) had already remarked that the SSTH seemed to be excluding different types of text by exclusively focussing on a specific “joke format” (1994: 208).<sup>11</sup> He conceived of the General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH) which he felt better suited to account for a larger variety of texts as it includes more areas of linguistic theory in the form of Knowledge Resources (Attardo 1994: 222–223). The GTVH, then, expands on the SSTH by including six hierarchically organized (top-to-bottom) knowledge resources. The first one is the “script opposition”,

<sup>9</sup> An extended analysis of this joke in terms of Raskin’s model can be found in Raskin 1985, pages 117 to 127.

<sup>10</sup> That the focus on short and specifically designed jokes could be problematic is also highlighted by Morreall (2004).

<sup>11</sup> Raskin himself has stated that the “*purview*” of the SSTH is “*textual humor*” and is “most easily applicable to short canned jokes” (Raskin et al. 2009: 288 his emphasis).



which essentially amounts to the incongruity of the two opposing and (partially) overlapping scripts of the SSTH.<sup>12</sup> A second knowledge resource is the logical mechanism, allowing recipients to resolve the initial script opposition or incongruity (Attardo 2001: 25). An example of a logical mechanism would be role-reversal. A script opposition can be resolved when we realise that the roles attached to a particular script have been reversed. A third knowledge resource, the situation, refers to “the objects, participants, instruments, activities, etc.” of the joke (Attardo 2001: 24). The next knowledge resource is the target of a joke, who or what we laugh at. Unlike script oppositions, the target is not a mandatory knowledge resource but rather functions as an “optional parameter”, simply because not all jokes are aggressive (Attardo 2001: 23–24). The fifth knowledge resource is the “narrative strategy” and describes how the joke is presented, how it is organized (not to be confused with literary genre, stresses Attardo). The final one is “language”, which “is responsible for the exact wording of the text and for the placement of the functional elements that constitute it”. Jokes, says Attardo, can be easily paraphrased and, as long as the meaning remains intact, retain their humorous quality (2001: 22–23). Every joke, then, can be analysed by simply filling in these parameters.

The GTVH is not only suited to analyse short jokes but can also be used to study humour in literature, according to Attardo, by identifying individual jokes in the text. All humorous elements are then mapped along a vector and assigned to progressively overarching structures.<sup>13</sup> While the GTVH proves fruitful for the analysis of short jokes, it is less suited to the analysis of literary texts of greater length as it treats these texts as a “simple succession of humorous moments” (Ermida 2008: 109). Such a view, however, does little to further our understanding of the role humour fulfils in a literary text and its impact on the interpretation of that text. This is perhaps unsurprising as the objective of the GTVH is to elucidate why a particular text is funny and it is not particularly interested in the reaction to or interpretation of the humour in a text (Attardo 2001: 30).

The focus on individual jokes essentially mimics the goal of the SSTH to try and understand how a “joke works” and to try “*understanding it the way people*

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<sup>12</sup> A concept later refined in Hempelmann and Attardo (2011).

<sup>13</sup> These individual humorous elements are called lines and include “punch lines” and “jab lines”, the difference between the two being that punch lines only occur in text final position whereas jab lines can occur in any other position in the text. Three or more lines can be “formally or thematically linked” by means of textual or intertextual references to form a “strand” thus allowing readers to spot emerging patterns within the text (Attardo 2001: 79–89; Attardo 2008: 110–111).

*do*” (Raskin et al. 2009: 289 his emphasis). But such an approach ultimately proves insufficient as it fails to relate these humorous sequences to the narrative context. It is precisely for this reason that Hamilton feels the need to supplement the GTVH with Cooke’s concept of the “comic climax”, which “adds a global perspective on the narrative and the interaction of narratological elements” (Hamilton 2013: 8). A similar sentiment is expressed by Triezenberg when she explains that the “GTVH and its extensions are not sufficient to successfully describe the workings of humorous literature” (Triezenberg 2004: 412). Like Triezenberg, I do not doubt the importance of the notion of a script opposition as a prerequisite for humorous utterances (2004: 412), but, unlike Hamilton (2013: 72, 83), I do doubt the overall suitability of the GTVH and its knowledge resources for literary analysis.

Some of Attardo’s operational parameters are only loosely defined, a problem he himself is cognizant of (Attardo 2001: 207–208) and which he later addresses, at least as far as logical mechanisms are concerned (Hempelmann and Attardo 2011). Additionally, one might call into question the added value of some of the knowledge resources to literary analysis, as currently conceptualised. In his own analysis of Oscar Wilde’s short story ‘Lord Arthur Savile’s Crime’ (1887), the knowledge resources of logic mechanism, narrative strategy and language are frequently left open or simply considered irrelevant (Attardo 2001: 163–199). The way in which value is assigned to language is indicative of this issue. As indicated earlier, language merely points to the direct “wording” of the joke and any joke can be freely rephrased “without changes in its semantic content” (Attardo 2001: 22). Attardo illustrates this as follows:

- (1) ‘How many Poles does it take to screw in a light bulb? Five, one to hold the light bulb and four to turn the table’ (2001: 22).
- (2) ‘The number of Pollacks [sic] needed to screw in a light bulb? Five – one to hold the bulb and four to turn the table’ (2001: 22).

To Attardo, the meaning of the joke has remained “intact”, specifically because the punch line has remained unchanged (2001: 22). From the linguistic point of view substituting the neutral term Poles for the disparaging Polack need not impact the meaning of the joke, but both within the context of everyday social interaction and the literary text, however, such a change impacts our interpretation of the joke.

A similar argument can be made for the other knowledge resources. Vandaele for instance, remarks that the GTVH “finds story-world participants a relatively unimportant ‘prop,’ and even less central as potential ‘targets’ of humor” (Vandaele 2012: 97). In literary texts, however, humour is predominantly

generated by characters, their actions, and how these actions are received and perceived by both characters and readers (Vandaele 2010: 736–737).

Some of the criticism levelled at cognitive theories of humour in general seems to apply to the GTVH and its suitability for literary analysis as well. Billig, for instance, feels that cognitive theories evince a tendency to reduce “humour to the bloodless structure of the joke” which removes them from the socio-cultural context in which they circulate (Billig 2005: 66). But to understand how humour works we need to understand the “relationship between joke and experience” (Driessen 1997: 223). The GTVH, particularly, fails to adequately account for the importance of the socio-cultural context for humour (Hamilton 2013: 24). A similar argument can be made for literature, where the “function(s) of a joke” (Lewis 2006: 41) or any other expression of humour can only be understood in the context of the literary text as a whole. The insistence on the importance of (the social and cultural) context stems from the belief, as expressed by Critchley, that humour, ultimately and undeniably, is a shared experience (2002: 80). And while Critchley refers to the interaction between live human beings, literary humour is no less a shared experience, whether that be between reader and character, between characters, character and setting, or any other possible constellation. In order to understand the role of (absurdist) humour in literary texts, we need to not only consider incongruity at a linguistic level, but also at the conceptual level by focussing on the interaction between readers, the literary text and the context. Schema theory offers a mean to do just that.

## 4 Schema theory and absurdist humour

Schema theory has a long lineage dating back to the early twentieth century and has featured prominently in the fields of psychology and artificial intelligence.<sup>14</sup>

Schema theory has left its mark on cognitive theories of humour,<sup>15</sup> most notably in the SSTH where scripts are defined as “a large chunk of semantic information surrounding the word or evoked by it” (Raskin 1985: 81). By

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<sup>14</sup> I will use schema and schemata as general terms that include scripts and frames. A frame, as conceived by Marvin Minsky is a “data-structure for representing a stereotyped situation, like being in a certain kind of living room, or going to a child’s birthday party” (Minsky 1975, 212). Minsky’s *frame* is largely similar to Schank and Abelson’s script. One difference is that scripts are generally thought of as dynamic (dealing with sequences of events) and frames as containing information on static objects and entities (Herman 1997, 1047).

<sup>15</sup> See for instance Norrick (1986) or Wyer and Collins (1992).

integrating scripts into the SSTH, Raskin aimed to remediate a perceived shortcoming of semantics of the Katz-Fodor kind, which only looked at text “in isolation” and to account for different aspects important in text processing, such as the “knowledge of the world, of language, [...], the situation in which the text occurs,” and “the participants in the situation” (Raskin et al. 2009: 290). This might hold true when analysing short jokes, but, as seen earlier, it is less so the case for humour in longer and more complex narrative texts. Although Raskin remains convinced of the explanatory power of the SSTH, the GTVH, and its latest evolution in the form of the Ontological Semantic Theory of Humour (OSTH),<sup>16</sup> he does single out absurd jokes as instances of humour that require additional “skill” to “analyze” as they are generally more difficult “to understand” for most people (Raskin et al. 2009: 306). The distinction Raskin makes here between absurd jokes and other jokes is similar to the one cited in the introduction, namely that absurdist humour is a specific type of humour that lacks resolution. That absurdist humour is awarded special status by linguistic theories of humour is interesting, especially in light of the many humour theories that tend to consider the absurd and humour as inextricably linked (Kant, Schopenhauer, Chafe (2007), Brodwin (1972)). It should be pointed out, however, that the absurd is not always understood the same way by different theoreticians, undoubtedly owing to the exigencies of their respective fields of research. For intellectuals like Kant, Schopenhauer or Kierkegaard, the absurd is obviously conceptualised in relation to their overarching philosophical project (as in Kierkegaard’s absurd leap of faith, for instance). Conversely, in cognitive humour research the absurd is generally described in terms of mental and cognitive acuity (specifically the (in)ability to reconcile certain incongruities). Interestingly enough, these seemingly contrastive positions are both particularly relevant to understanding and interpreting absurdist humour.

Noonan suggests that there exist “two main strands” of absurdist humour: one that mirrors the existential absurd and gives expression to the “apparent meaninglessness of human existence” through “darker humor” and a strand that centres around the “breakdown of logic” and which leans towards nonsense (Noonan 2014: 1). This second strand and nonsense humour are often equated (Hamilton 2013: 26; Ermida 2008: 74; Ruch 2008: 49; Moura 2010: 13), unsurprising perhaps as they are both generally defined as consisting of “logical non sequiturs” (Davis 1993: 100) and thus are characterised by an absence of logic. There are, however, some significant differences between nonsense and absurdist humour. According to Tigges, literary nonsense creates “an unresolved tension between presence and absence of meaning” and it does this by

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<sup>16</sup> See Raskin et al. (2009).

emphasising “its verbal nature” (1988: 55). This emphasis on the verbal nature also constitutes the most important difference, says Tigges, as in “nonsense, language *creates* a reality, in the absurd, language *represents* a senseless reality” (1988: 128 his emphasis). In other words, nonsense seems to primarily operate on a linguistic level highlighting the creative power of language, whereas the absurd operates on the conceptual level. Absurdist humour reveals a world that is familiar and yet at the same time unfamiliar.

The interplay between familiarity and unfamiliarity also lies at the basis of what Palmer calls the “logic of the absurd” (1994: 96). Much like Suls before him, Palmer believes that most jokes in a first stage create an incongruity which is then followed by a “bifurcated logical process, which leads the listener to judge that the state of affairs portrayed is simultaneously highly implausible and just a little plausible”, as opposed to nonsense which is entirely implausible (Palmer 1994: 96–97). That readers frequently find themselves vacillating between high implausibility and low plausibility is exacerbated by the way in which the events causing absurdist humour are received in the storyworld. In an article exploring the “odd talk” that is characteristic of many absurdist texts, Simpson explains that it is not so much the breakdown of the “structural level” of discourse that causes incongruity, but rather the “mismatch between context and utterance”, between “communicative strategy and discourse context” (Simpson 1998: 39–40). He goes on to say that the incongruity that readers experience when reading absurdist literature is not only caused by the strange actions or the aberrant behaviour of literary characters themselves but also by the fact that these are almost always received without any surprise and considered to be normal within that fictional context (Simpson 1998: 42, 47).

Absurdist humour challenges readers’ inability to swiftly and easily reconcile literary text and experience (Safer 1989: 94). It is caused by an incongruity that defies the expectation of (logical) causality. The incongruity is not so much situated at the linguistic level, but owes its existence to the way in which readers engage with the literary text. Let us return to the Golgafrinchans and their new, leaf-based economy. At a purely grammatical or semantic level there is nothing odd about this passage. We know what leaves are and are familiar with the basic economic principles described here. What does stand out, however, is that the former have been integrated into the schematic structure of the latter. The incongruity here, then, is one of a conceptual nature. Readers possess a schema of how the (Western) economic system functions. Money, recognised as legal tender, can be exchanged for goods and services. Highly simplified, inflation occurs when money decreases in value, when it gets you less bang for your buck, so to speak. This can be caused by a disturbed relationship between the market mechanisms of supply and demand (for example, when supply is unable

to meet demand, or when production costs rise significantly) or through the creation of a surplus of money. A legitimate strategy to counter inflation, assuming that consumption and population remained ‘steady state’, would be to halt the production of new money or reduce the amount of money in circulation.

In the Golgafrinchian society, money has (seemingly) arbitrarily been replaced by leaves, which strikes readers as absurd (even though the paper money we use has no more intrinsic value than leaves). But seeing as leaves are so readily available, they are suddenly faced with a “small inflation problem”, a problem which in itself is not all that surprising and in keeping with our schematic knowledge. Their proposed solution of controlling the amount of leaves in circulation is, once again, seemingly congruent with our schematic expectation. That the solution is taken to such an extreme, however, is somewhat more unexpected. The impromptu decision to “...er, burn down all the forests” is not only stupid but also very short-sighted, as the leaves will decay and they will have burned their best means of generating new money. The crowd, primarily motivated by greed, go along with the plan after only the briefest moment of contemplation.

The text, then, offers a set of, at first glance, logical responses to a particular problem analogous to what readers can expect on the basis of acquired knowledge of how the real world works: the Golgafrinchians decide on a new currency, an overabundance of money causes inflation, and a plan to combat said inflation is formulated by removing excess money. Adopting leaves as a means of currency, however, is far removed from readers’ everyday experiences and expectations, especially as it culminates in a plan to burn down the forests, a response well beyond all proportion. It is precisely by simultaneously creating a certain amount of overlap as well as a few striking differences between fictional world and real world, that the scene described above generates absurdist humour. What makes it even more absurd is that there was no need to create a new source of money in the first place. Prior to the Golgafrinchians debating the finer points of fiscal policy, Ford Prefect asks them why they would need money “if none of you [the Golgafrinchians] actually produces anything?”, and naively (and ironically) points out that money “doesn’t grow on trees you know” (Adams 1995b: 298), adding yet another layer of humour through its reference to readers’ proverbial knowledge.

In a similar way, absurdist humour is also created by playing with readers’ expectations based on genre schemata, particularly those pertaining to science fiction. Science fiction in general, says Peter Stockwell, has the advantage that its fictional worlds can “encompass all the events and inventory of our own actual world plus all the imaginary features of non-actual worlds” (Stockwell

2003: 195). *The Hitch Hiker* makes clever use of this stratagem by grounding the extraordinary in the ordinary, the mundane even. Recall the unfortunate Agrajag who was reincarnated as a bowl of petunias, a rabbit or a fly. The novel incorporates many elements characteristic of science fiction such as teleportation, interstellar flight, or supercomputers. But in most cases there exists no direct correlation between technological advancement on the one hand and intelligence and resourcefulness on the other hand. No race in *The Hitch Hiker's* fictional universe epitomises this discrepancy more than the Golgafrinchans. Their space ship was deliberately set to crash on Earth, in order to strand the less desirable third of Golgafrinchan society on this planet, (those remaining at home being later “wiped out by a virulent disease contracted from a dirty telephone” (Adams 1995b: 274, emphasis in original)). Genre schemata are inverted here as the Golgafrinchan are utterly helpless despite the technology that brought them there. They cannot even make fire, or decide on what colour the wheel should be if they ever get round to inventing it in the first place. Their overall stupidity does not match readers' expectations based on the level of technology they possess and their antics are a continuous source of absurdist humour.

I have only focussed on one rather short passage, but many more such examples can be found in the novel. As a consequence readers might start to expect the unexpected, providing them with a set of intratextual schemata possibly mitigating the incongruous experience. The manner in which these abstract incongruities are concretised, however, remains striking enough to generate absurdist humour. The analysis of the fragment above also illustrates why an analysis strictly in terms of the SSTH/GTVH does not do justice to the richness of the text. Literary humour cannot be broken down into small and isolated packets, nor is it a strictly linear process, as evinced by Ford Prefect's comment about money growing on trees which causes humour only when reinterpreted in light of subsequent events. So too does the absurdist humour in this passage not stem from a single script opposition. Rather it is realised by activating in its readers a specific schema. The text then substitutes a vital parameter of the schema (leaves for money) that generates a new set of absurdist incongruities “blended in the same assemblage”, to quote Beattie (1776: 349), which work in concert to create the humorous effect. This is only exacerbated by the Golgafrinchans' handling of the situation, highlighted stylistically, which stands in stark contrast to the disbelief of focaliser Ford Prefect, who is happily ignored by the Golgafrinchans.

The opposing positions held by these two narrative entities are reflected in the reader having to simultaneously entertain a scenario which is highly improbable when considered from the point of view of Ford Prefect, but nevertheless



plausible within the broader context created by the fictional world. The humorous effect also hinges on the characterisation of the Golgafrinchans and their society as rather vapid and superficial. The group of Golgafrinchans we meet on Earth were forced to relocate there approximately two million years ago. This actually makes them humanity's ancestors and adds yet another (contextual) layer of meaning which, again, enhances the humorous experience. Particularly when we consider that we already know how their story ends (with their inevitable downfall as Earth is destroyed two million years later to make way for an intergalactic bypass). While on earth they also manage to negatively influence the supercomputer Deep Thought's search for the "Ultimate Question to the Answer to Life, the Universe, and Everything". The text here invokes a storyworld very similar to our own but with some jarring differences, supporting Oring's assessment that absurdist humour exposes a disparity between storyworld and our own experiential world (2003: 25). The question, however, remains whether or not that disparity/incongruity can or indeed has to be resolved?

Much like incongruity, resolution is rarely defined unambiguously and varies according to the different incongruity-resolution models. According to Attardo, there exists a difference between "the enabling mechanism", inherent to the joke text, and "resolution itself (which is a dynamic process)" (Ritchie 2009: 320). The means through which we move from static text element to dynamic resolution, however, remain unclear. The issue at stake across varying incongruity-resolution models is whether or not the initial incongruity is fully (Suls), partially (Attardo, Oring), or simply not eliminated. But that is perhaps asking the wrong question.

People have a propensity to strive for logical coherence, to make sense of their surroundings. We do this by looking for familiar patterns, by engaging with the world (fictional or not) based on what we know, what we are "used to" (Davies 2014: 122). This knowledge and these experiences are made accessible in the form of schemata. But absurdist humour disrupts this process by challenging the confines of everyday logic (Zijderveld 1971: 28). We do, however, "dislike failing to understand" (Schank 1995: 60). Resolution then might be conceived of as not only dealing with how humour works but also with why. To that end we need to try and ascertain the function of absurdist humour, which in the context of the reading process is inextricably linked to the literary interpretation.

The passage discussed above contains a "joke text" that hinges on an incongruity (leaves vs. money as legal tender) which most conventional humour theories, such as the GTVH, would catalogue as absurdist humour as there is no logical mechanism that satisfyingly explains why leaves would serve as a substitute for money. This at first glance innocuous joke provides the impetus for



the creation of multiple new and equally absurd incongruities. But rather than being treated as a localised phenomenon, this joke text and its absurdist humour must be understood and can only be fully appreciated in relation to the narrative context created by the novel. In order to make sense of the events and characters' responses to them readers rely on their schemata, which incorporate both general and text-specific knowledge (such as genre conventions). Absurdist humour is a product of that interaction and here serves to enhance and emphasise the discrepancy between the storyworld and the real world. The choice of using leaves as currency now makes sense and the incongruity is resolved at the moment of interpretation.

This type of resolution, which is of a hermeneutic nature, should also be understood as a neurocognitive process. Armstrong (2013) describes the hermeneutic circle as a corollary of a human's brain structure. The "recursive, circular interdependence of part and whole in interpretation", he states, simply follows from the way in which we perceive and comprehend the world surrounding us (2013: 55). In order to successfully navigate our world people constantly formulate expectations about what will happen next on the basis of (relatively) stable patterns and categories, i.e. schemata. Armstrong, however, remarks that the "brain's quest for constancy is inherently contradictory" as the brain must maintain a constant equilibrium between "stability" on the one hand and "flexibility" on the other hand so that it can satisfactorily assimilate new or diverging information (Armstrong 2013: 74). Consequently, "one can only understand the unfamiliar by grafting it onto what is already familiar, even if this causes the unfamiliar to transform the familiar". Similarly, when readers are presented with new or anomalous information they do not delete existing schemata but rather readjust or expand on them so that they are better equipped to deal with new and unconventional information (Armstrong 2013: 73). The structure of the brain, then, says Armstrong, is designed to handle "conflicting readings". He further specifies that "comprehension" is a "configurative construction in which the overarching pattern guides the construal of its parts" and thus mirrors the hermeneutic circle (2013: 78–79).

As I have illustrated, absurdist humour operates along much the same lines. By playing with similarity and difference (or implausibility and probability), absurdist humour challenges "the expectations readers bring to texts based on their habitual patterns of consistency building", which take the form of schemata (Armstrong 2013: 86). At the moment of interpretation, then, we recognise absurdist humour as a narrative strategy that forces us to relinquish the schemata that organise and structure everyday life. As a consequence we are compelled to more closely consider and ultimately reinterpret the text. The absurdist episode describing the Golgafrinchans and their economic system cleverly

combines the two strands of absurdist humour by alerting readers to the dangers of human greed and short-sightedness (which humanity seems doomed to repeat) through the breakdown of logic processes allowing readers to resolve the initially perceived disparity between fictional world and referential world. The incongruity of absurdist humour can thus be resolved when considered within the context of the literary text. Yet at the same time it is also instrumental in creating that same context, as it forms an integral part of the narrative structure in terms of characterisation, setting, and plot development.

## 5 Conclusion

This article concerns itself with a specific type of literary humour, namely absurdist humour. It started by tracing the roots of the concept of incongruity in Western philosophy which revealed three recurring considerations which also proved relevant for later studies of humour as well as for the study of absurdist humour in particular. The first hinted at the close connection between humour and absurdity. The second indicates that the incongruity giving rise to humour defies or violates expectations, and thirdly, that it generally does so in a surprising manner. The fascination with incongruity and its subsequent resolution carried over to more recent research in a wide variety of scientific disciplines such as psychology, sociology, and linguistics.

Traditional humour research has a tendency to focus on short, often specifically designed, jokes. Linguistic theories of humour such as the SSTH and the GTVH nevertheless claim that they are equally well equipped to analyse humour in longer and more complex narrative texts. Whilst this might be true in theory, it proves less obvious in practice, mostly because these linguistic models and the field of literary studies are at cross-purposes. The SSTH and the GTVH are predominantly interested in providing a formal theory describing the mechanisms underlying humour, eschewing the hermeneutic inclination associated with literary analysis. Consequently, they do not sufficiently account for the specificity of the narrative context.

Exploring the role and function of absurdist humour in literature, the article posits that absurdist humour (or humour in general for that matter) cannot be understood by reducing the text to a linear succession of individual jokes. Literary humour can only be understood in terms of the reading process, of how readers engage with literary texts, a process facilitated by schemata. In a first step, absurdist humour was delineated from nonsense humour by defining its specific features. Absurdist humour is caused by a conceptual incongruity between the

fictional world and the experiential world of the reader causing him or her to simultaneously juggle contrasting interpretations of the fictional world as highly implausible and barely plausible. This is only exacerbated by the way in which events are received and acted on by fictional characters, which further defies or violates readers' expectations. Finally, the traditional view of absurdist humour as a type of humour that remains unresolved was challenged by suggesting that resolution be equated with (literary) interpretation and removing it from the single level of the text to the higher ontological level of the reader interpretation. The case of absurdist humour also illustrates why literary humour cannot be studied in isolation, entwined as it is with the narrative structure of literary texts in terms of plot development, characterisation, and setting.

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